

# Endangered Languages: The Crumbling of the Ecosystem of Language and Culture

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## The Erosion of the Linguo-cultural Ecosystem

The destruction of the natural environment and of the global ecosystem is fundamentally linked to the issue of extinction faced by a large number of distinct languages developed by linguo-ethnic groups around the world.<sup>1</sup>

The term "ecosystem" is used here to refer to an ecosystem encompassing human beings and the environment with which they constantly interact. The "environment" includes not just the natural world but the human society/world of which we ourselves are constituents and, also, the non-physical world (religious/mythological, mental/spiritual, and the 'other' worlds) we have constructed for ourselves. It is a subjective and collective environment, in the construction of which language plays a crucial role. Hence the ecosystem of culture which centres on the language involved particularly in cognition and perception, that is, the "linguo-cultural ecosystem".

The destruction of this linguo-cultural ecosystem seems analogous in some ways to that of the natural ecosystem. Just as the diminution of biodiversity that accompanies the destruction of the natural environment saps the vitality of the world of living things, the diminution of linguistic and cultural diversity may cause a decline in the intellectual variety of humankind.

The number of languages currently spoken in the world is in one estimate 6,760.<sup>2</sup> These range in scale from major languages (like Chinese and English) to languages with only one last speaker (like Eyak in Alaska). Some 96% of these languages (around 6,500) are spoken by only 4% of the world's population, while a mere 4% are spoken by 96%. We may say that the former 96% are truly small languages, which are becoming extinct at a pace that surpasses the rate of extinction of animal and plant species. Their existence is marginal or is being marginalized.

The key measure of a language's viability is considered not so much the number of people who speak it as the extent to which children are learning it as their native tongue. Once the process of native-language acquisition stops, the chain of transmission is broken. The situation may be likened to that of a natural species that has lost its reproductive ability.

According to Prof. Michael E. Krauss' prognosis, half of the present 6,000-plus languages now in existence will have disappeared by 2100, and as many as 95% will be either extinct or on the verge of extinction. This means that only some 300 languages, 5% of the present total, seems to have their survival assured at least for the time being. Krauss groups the existing languages into three categories: (1) "moribund" languages that children have already stopped acquiring as mother tongues, 25–50%; (2) "endangered" languages which children are still learning as mother tongues but which at the current rate appear to face the possibility of becoming moribund by the end of the 21st century, 40–75%; and (3) "safe" languages for which the near future seems assured, 5–10%.

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<sup>1</sup> The danger to languages which is the topic of this article is naturally far from the "degeneration" or "contamination" cited by linguistic purists who rue the influx of borrowings from other tongues.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph E. Grimes, et al., *Ethnologue: Language Family Index* (13th ed.). Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1996



Yupik Eskimo students in the author's Eskimo grammar class in Alaska in 1980

## The Lack of Concern about Linguistic Extinction

This picture of languages in peril may be viewed in various ways. Opinions may vary as to whether it is a simply one-way path to extinction, now that newly revitalized varieties of endangered languages are reported to be emerging here and there (though very insecurely).

Language, like the air we breathe, is generally not the object of conscious attention or concern unless it has become too severely "polluted." Accordingly, awareness of the problem of endangered languages is in short supply, not just among the general public, government officials, and academics in general, but even among linguists. Although the pace and rate of linguistic extinction is claimed to be far greater than that of biological extinction, in the case of biological species, it is relatively easy to recognize that each type of plant or animal life has its own value and function. People thus react sensitively to the loss of biodiversity.

In the case of languages, by contrast, it may understandably be harder for a person to feel the same sense of crisis. Extinction is apt to be seen as a natural fate that different languages have to suffer at different times. Especially if it is a matter of one ethnic group being eroded by another, resulting in the extinction of its language as its members shift to the other group's language, the loss may not be taken as the extinction of the group itself.

Another factor for the lack of concern would be that language is commonly seen as little more than a tool for communication, despite the fact that it has several other functions including cognition and perception (below).

Furthermore, the widespread attitude toward minority languages may also be relevant. Speakers of major tongues may still cling to one degree or another to the stigmatizing notion that minor languages, especially those that are unwritten, are "backward" or "inferior".

## Language as the Last Stronghold of a Culture

Communication is an important function of language, but it is far from the only one. Language is an integral part of a

group's culture and social existence. Here "culture", as I see it, is a group's distinctive way of (1) perceiving the environment (natural, social, and non-physical) or the totality of realia of which the group's members themselves are a part, and (2) ecologically interacting with and adapting to this environment, a process that is linked overall to the form in which the perceptions exist, or, in other words, how the environment is categorized and how the categories are handled in thinking and linguistic expression.

Language not only helps us to perceive the environment, but it informs the unique culture of the group, rooted in various aspects of its past. Even in the languages of groups whose material and technological cultures are simple, we find tapestries of profound observations and perceptions regarding the environment and ingenious or resourceful methods of adapting to it, striking us with the breath of human wisdom. In this sense a language is primordially infused with the culture.

Language is a part of culture. And at the same time a whole culture is enshrined in or built into language. But they are often considered in contrast to each other, in term of "language vs. (nonlinguistic) culture." For one thing, the potential diversity of languages is, structurally speaking, wider and greater than that of culture, and the degree of correlation between language and culture is not so strong. In other words, language has a certain autonomy allowing it to function somewhat separately from culture. Groups with stone-age level cultures may possibly have languages of a high grammatical complexity. It is not the case that simplicity of a culture corresponds to simplicity of a language, or complexity of a culture to complexity of a language.

Once an ethnic group loses its own language as such, even if some fragments of its material culture (e.g., ethnic costumes, crafts, or whatever) live on, they may represent little more than a lingering twilight, and the culture may possibly have been lost or, at least, may not be functioning any longer as an organic it used to be.

Besides serving as a tool for perception, ratiocination (i.e. rational thinking), and communication, language exerts a great power in forming people into groups. Many of the



A Yupik woman making eskimo ice cream (akutaq)



A Yupik woman slicing a pile of salmon

world's modern nation-states have used languages as a unifying force, while depriving ethnic minorities of their languages has become a powerful means for the eradication of their identities. When an ethnic group loses its language, it does not merely lose its distinctiveness and pride, but in fact it ceases to exist as a coherent cultural unit. It would then be reasonable to say that language is the last stronghold of a culture.

### Intellectual and Scientific Assets

When a language disappears from the face of the earth, however, the loss is not limited to the individuals or the ethnic group that previously used it. If we consider that each language, infused with a unique culture, represents a distinct system for creating as well as comprehending the world, then the disappearance of any language represents a loss of intellectual heritage for humanity as a whole.

Surely the ability of the world to sustain diverse cultures, each supported by its own language, is an indicator of the health of the linguo-cultural ecosystem. And as genetic diversity is a key to the biological vigor and survival of a species, linguistic and cultural diversity may be a key to the intellectual vigor and survival of humankind. The loss of biodiversity and destruction of the natural ecosystem may jeopardize the survival of humanity, the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity may lead to its intellectual decline.

Linguistic diversity not only offers a glimpse into a group's unique cosmology, but it also shows us that the human mind is capable of perceiving the environment in various and often surprising ways.

Many endangered minor languages may have the potential of providing data unobtainable anywhere else. Their loss is irretrievable in the light of the volume and quality of that invaluable data. Remember that at least 50% or most 95% of the languages of the world are progressively declining and dying out before they can offer many of their clues to various linguistic and cultural issues. Now that many exotic languages are rushing toward extinction and their unique

linguistic features are being wiped out by expanding major languages or lingua francas, one may feel an indescribable sense of sorrow, irritation, and mortification.

### Endangered Languages and Linguistic Researchers

The decline or extinction of a language hinges on complex political, economic, social, and psychological factors. Accordingly the preservation of a language is not something that can be controlled by any single institution or policy. And what linguists can do is limited.

There are, however, some ways in which linguists can contribute to their preservation. They can work with the community to create a writing system based on scientific analysis and take on the job of teaching and propagating it. They may cooperate, in compiling a dictionary and grammar, making educational materials of various kinds, training teachers, and developing a curriculum.

Compiling linguistically accurate records of near-extinct languages is highly important work for linguistic researchers, and can also figure prominently in the preservation or revival of those languages. The work basically consists of producing a detailed account of that language, including a systematic description of the grammar based on adequate phonological analysis, compilation of a dictionary with as much detail as possible and the audio and video recording of stories, songs, etc. and everyday conversations.

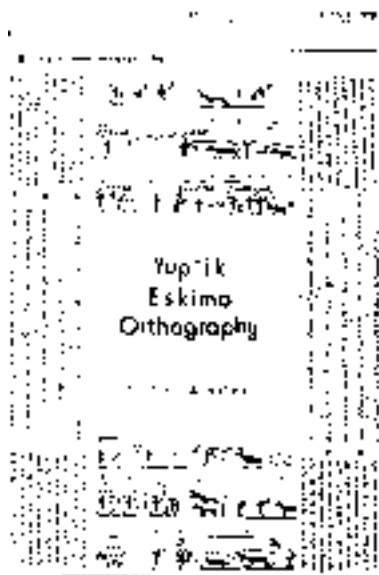
Along with such documentation through fieldwork, it is also important to collect and make use of existing records (field notes, sound recordings, transcriptions of recordings, and other materials). It is not usual that words, phrases, and passages which were recorded two or three generations ago suddenly bring back an old person's memories like a faded old picture and bring up items that had been overlooked during interviews with current speakers, providing more than supplementary information. Discovering and collecting such past records and utilizing them for our work before it is too late is especially important for endangered languages for which research has been lagging.

While interest in endangered languages is spreading internationally, time is very short for earnestly and effectively studying living languages, considering the speed at which they decline and disappear. Compared to the vast number of minority languages urgently awaiting linguistic survey and research, the number of researchers is critically small. More young students or native speakers need to be recruited and fostered who will be committed to descriptive works on endangered languages, and linguists must complement each other by sharing information and perspective, pooling their data, aggregating and publishing the results.

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A textbook on Yupik Orthography